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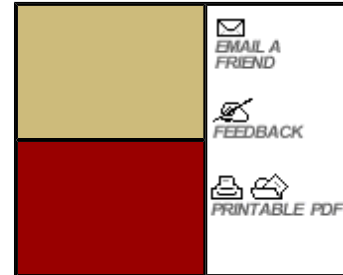
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## Analysis

# An Early Look Ahead

By John Isaacs | February 28, 2008



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Each of the three major presidential candidates left standing would make major changes to the national security and foreign policies carried out by the George W. Bush administration over the last seven years. Not surprisingly, exactly what kind of changes depends on who ends up on the steps of Capitol Hill taking the oath of office next January—Sen. [John McCain](#) (R-AZ), Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-NY), or Sen. Barack Obama (D-IL).

The following analysis is based on several indicators: the candidates' U.S. Senate voting records; their national security platforms as laid out in articles and op-eds; and their responses to queries in debates, public appearances, and questionnaires. Although campaign pledges and voting records do not always accurately translate into actual policy, they can provide important clues as to the future president's policy inclinations.

## Iraq War

The war in Iraq has produced the sharpest divisions among the three remaining candidates on the 2008 campaign trail. When the next president takes office, he or she will face major decisions about Iraq, where the United States will have been for almost six years, and where it is likely that upward of 140,000 U.S. troops will still remain.

John McCain cosponsored the 2002 vote to authorize the use of force against Iraq, arguing at the time that Saddam Hussein was “a threat of the first order.” [1](#) Although he was a vehement critic of the administration's “mismanagement and failure” during the early war years, he advocated the surge of additional troops to Iraq and the need to stay as long as necessary to win the war. [2](#) He joined with Sen. [Joseph Lieberman](#) (I-CT) to pen an Op-Ed in the *Wall Street Journal* entitled “The Surge Worked.” [3](#) He has suggested that his Democratic opponents advocate “surrender” by calling for a withdrawal timetable and bills his campaign as the “No Surrender Tour.” [4](#) McCain has proposed that the U.S. military's 50-plus years in South Korea, Japan, and Germany is a good model for Iraq. [5](#)

Hillary Clinton's position has been more complex. She joined McCain in supporting the 2002 authorization to go to war, and although she has refused to apologize for the vote, she later said, “If I knew then what I now know, I would not have voted that way.” [6](#) Within 60 days of taking office, Clinton has promised to begin withdrawing troops at the rate of one or two brigades a month, with the goal of getting most combat troops out by the end of 2009. [7](#)

In 2002, when he was an Illinois state senator, Barack Obama opposed the war. After he was elected to the U.S. Senate, he and Clinton both voted against early proposals by Sen. Russ Feingold (D-WI) and others to set a timetable for withdrawal; now both Obama and Clinton vote consistently in favor of establishing a timetable. Obama's plan for exiting Iraq would, like Clinton's, send home one or two combat brigades a month, with all combat troops out by the end of 2009. [8](#) However, at an MSNBC debate in September 2007, neither Clinton nor Obama would guarantee that they would have all U.S. forces out of Iraq by the end of their first term. [9](#) Both candidates have opposed permanent bases in Iraq.

## Policy toward Iran

President Bush has displayed unremitting hostility toward the radical regime dominating Iran, a country that U.S. intelligence sources report had previously been pursuing a nuclear weapons program. He branded Iran part of the “axis of evil” and promoted regime change as the preferred U.S. policy. With a few limited exceptions, the United States under Bush has refused to talk directly with Iran.

McCain has been clear about his position on Iran. In early February, he told an audience: “I intend to make unmistakably clear to Iran we will not

permit a government that espouses the destruction of the State of Israel as its fondest wish and pledges undying enmity to the United States to possess the weapons to advance their malevolent ambitions." [10](#) He also rejects "unconditional dialogues" with Iran. [11](#)

Obama and Clinton have delivered messages on Iran that were more mixed. Obama has promised to open a dialogue with Iran without preconditions to attempt to work out a solution. [12](#) However, he has called Iran "a threat to all of us" and suggested in March 2007 that the military option should remain on the table. [13](#) At the same time, he has said that it "would be a profound mistake for us to initiate a war with Iran" and condemned the administration's "saber-rattling" on Iran. [14](#)

Clinton has pledged to reach out immediately to Iran, saying, "you don't make peace with your friends. You have got to deal with ... people whose interests diverge from yours." [15](#) At the same time, she has indicated that she remains open to all options, including military ones. [16](#) Clinton has also declared: "We cannot, we should not, we must not permit Iran to build or acquire nuclear weapons." [17](#) She voted for a controversial amendment offered by Sen. [Jon Kyl](#) (R-AZ) and Lieberman that proposed labeling Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard a terrorist organization. [18](#) Obama missed that vote but called the amendment a repeat of the mistakes that led to war in Iraq; however, he had cosponsored an earlier bill declaring the Revolutionary Guard a terrorist organization. [19](#)

## **Nuclear Weapons**

In 2007, a bipartisan group of senior and former government officials called for moving toward a "world free of nuclear weapons." [20](#) In their article by that name, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, former Secretary of State George Shultz, former Sen. Sam Nunn (D-GA), and former Secretary of Defense William Perry urged the United States to lead an international effort to rethink traditional deterrence, reduce nuclear weapon stockpiles, and take other steps toward the longer term goal of a nuclear-weapon-free world.

Obama has been clear in his support of their effort. In response to a Council for a Livable World questionnaire, he promised: "As president, I will take the lead to work for a world in which the roles and risks of nuclear weapons can be reduced and ultimately eliminated." [21](#) While Clinton said that she supported the goal of a nuclear-free world, she was less specific in what she would do if elected: "As president, I will work to implement the sensible near-term steps" to achieve the objective. McCain has made no known statement on the plan from Kissinger et al., but he has promised to reduce nuclear weapons if elected. [22](#)

### *New Nuclear Weapons*

The Bush administration has forwarded proposals to build a new generation of nuclear weapons; however, these plans might be seen as conflicting with U.S. efforts to restrain other states' nuclear ambitions.

McCain has supported the proposed new nuclear weapons programs. In four key Senate votes from 2003 to 2005, McCain voted to proceed with the work on such weapons. [23](#) Clinton voted against these programs all four times. She was clear in response to a Council for a Livable World questionnaire: "The Bush administration has dangerously put the cart before the horse, planning to rush ahead with new nuclear weapons without any considered assessment of what we need these weapons for or what the impact of building them would be on our effort to stop the spread of nuclear weapons around the world." [24](#) Obama, only in the Senate for the fourth vote, also opposed the new weapons. He was less categorical to the council's queries, responding that he did not support "a premature decision to produce the [Reliable Replacement Warhead]." [25](#)

### *Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty*

One of the longest sought goals of the nuclear age has been a global ban on all nuclear test explosions as an important step to advance nuclear nonproliferation. In 1996, after 50 years of work, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty was signed and opened for ratification. However, three years later, the Senate decisively rejected the treaty. Although the United States has not conducted a nuclear test explosion since 1992, the Bush administration has not put the treaty forward for a new vote.

McCain voted against the treaty, stating at the time: "The viability of our nuclear deterrent is too central to our national security to rush approval of a treaty that cannot be verified and that will facilitate the decline of that deterrent." [26](#) There is little evidence that McCain will bring the treaty before the Senate; instead, he has written about strengthening the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). [27](#) Although neither Clinton nor Obama were in the Senate at the time of the 1999 vote, both have promised to make the test ban treaty a priority of their first term in office and pledged to work to rebuild bipartisan support for the treaty. [28](#)

## **National Missile Defense**

In 2001, the Bush administration withdrew from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and since then has moved swiftly to deploy national missile defense interceptors in Alaska and California. The latest fiscal budget request for 2009 is \$12.3 billion for all forms of missile defense.

McCain has declared that he "strongly supports the development and deployment of theater and national missile defenses." [29](#) His votes in the Senate back up that claim: he opposed all three amendments to cut the program in 2004. [30](#) In a 2001 speech to the Munich Conference on Security Policy, he advocated abandoning the ABM Treaty. [31](#)

Obama has been critical of the Bush missile defense plans: "The Bush Administration has in the past exaggerated missile defense capabilities and rushed deployments for political purposes." [32](#) Clinton's position has been more ambiguous. Of three key votes in 2004, she voted in effect for missile defense once and against it twice. However, she criticized President Bush's decision in 2001 to withdraw from the ABM Treaty and both she and Obama voted for an amendment offered by Sen. Carl Levin in 2005 (the last major vote on missile defense) while McCain missed the vote. [33](#) She also has criticized the Bush administration of "focusing obsessively on expensive and unproven missile defense technology." [34](#) Neither Clinton nor Obama has indicated plans for missile defense upon assuming the presidency.

#### *Missile Defense Site in Europe*

McCain has also been clear in his support for a third missile defense site in Europe that is bitterly opposed by Russia. Congress cut a portion of the funding for the program in 2007 in advance of approval from the two Central European countries. In an October 2007 debate, McCain said: "I don't care what [President Vladimir Putin's] objections are to it." [35](#) Obama has not been clear what he would do with the Bush proposal, but indicated that he would not allow the program "to divide 'new Europe' and 'old Europe.'" [36](#) It is also unclear what the Clinton policy would be.

#### **Other Issues in Brief**

*Closing Guantanamo Bay prison:* Clinton, Obama, and McCain agree: Close the prison. [37](#)

*U.S.-India nuclear deal:* McCain, Obama and Clinton all voted for the U.S.-India nuclear deal in 2006, but Obama and Clinton also voted for amendments to condition the deal on India ending military cooperation with Iran and a presidential certification that nuclear cooperation with India will not aid India in making more nuclear weapons. [38](#)

*Military forces:* McCain, Obama, and Clinton have all called for expanding the size of our active duty military forces. [39](#)

*North Korea:* Obama has called for "sustained, direct, and aggressive diplomacy" with North Korea; Clinton for "direct contact, engagement" with Pyongyang. [40](#) McCain argues: "It is unclear today whether North Korea is truly committed to verifiable denuclearization." [41](#)

*Nuclear nonproliferation:* Clinton and Obama have committed to securing all vulnerable nuclear weapons materials around the world within four years of taking office. [42](#) McCain has endorsed strengthening the International Atomic Energy Agency and putting the burden of proof on suspected violators of the NPT. [43](#)

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